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THE NEW RC: WILL IT PLEASE ANYONE?

Dr. Dallas D. Owens
Strategic Studies Institute

To their credit, the Army National Guard (ARNG) and the Army Reserve (USAR) have proposed sweeping changes to make their components capable of meeting future Army requirements.¹ Predictions for those future requirements come from a variety of Department of Defense (DoD) offices and envision a near- to mid-term strategic environment requiring constant mobilization at levels less than, but near, those currently experienced.² In turn, the ARNG and USAR know they cannot meet that need unless significant changes are made to their force structure, training, and mobilization process. Central to their proposed changes is the notion of a rotational force.

Shortly after unveiling their respective 6- and 5-year rotational plans, the ARNG and USAR began receiving a variety of objections. These objections correctly recognize that, for the plans to succeed, all of DoD must discipline itself to use the Reserve Components (RC) within some severe parameters. These parameters are necessary for the RC to introduce sufficient predictability into their force to manage it effectively. The DoD, in turn, must provide the RC with strategic predictability, a difficult task in times of strategic turbulence, especially when much of that turbulence is outside of DoD control. Any DoD commitment to predictability must therefore come from what they can control and that involves internal measures.

The most apparent troublesome parameter for the RC plans concerns the approximate number and duration of troops they can provide. No more than about 20% of the RC end strength would be available for about 1 year of boots-on-ground. That level is below current RC troop requirements, but not by a lot. To reduce RC participation to this level would require either combatant commanders to reduce requirements or the Army to rely on AC assets to make up the difference; either way, an RC appetite suppressant is required. For 20% to be enough, it must be the right package of capabilities. For the RC to prepare the right package, combatant commanders must have very precise contingency plans. But because plans can never be perfect, the AC must have capabilities to overcome unavoidable inadequacies in what the RC is prepared to provide. The logic behind “rebalancing” is precisely to allow components to restructure their force so they can provide the capabilities that plans call for and have sufficient inter-component flexibility to overcome the unexpected.

The RC recognizes that there is a possibility for a much higher, relatively short-term, requirement to support a major combat operation (MCO). Afterwards the RC would require a “reset” to allow return to the more routine rotational scheme. That reset is outside the scope of the plans and would certainly hamper RC support for a short period. But such a reset would also be necessary for the AC, and neither exceptional requirement should detract from the value of any component plan. To complicate matters, the reset might occur simultaneously with the phase IV portion of a MCO and, if Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) is a valid model, would likely require 20% availability of the RC. What this means is the reset must be incorporated into the mind-set (planning) and resourcing of the MCO, even after “major” combat operations formally end.

Another parameter is resource commitment. The RC requires a rapid transition to its new force structure and training plan. The current degraded condition of the RC requires immediate identification of the units that need to be ready to deploy next year, the year after, and the year

after that. The plans require immediate resources to redesign, equip, and train those near-term rotations. Resource requirements compete with AC transformation, global war on terror (GWOT) training, and current operations. The ARNG Brigade Combat Teams (BCT) are well positioned to be sufficiently resourced for their transformation because they are programmed to reset, equip, and train on a schedule similar to, but over a longer period of time than, their AC counterparts. This positioning is in part due to a more mature OIF/Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) rotational schedule for BCTs than is provided to support units. The transformational resource picture is less clear for non-BCT ARNG units and USAR units. The necessary resource commitment is not just for the success of RC plans, but for the success of Army and, ultimately, DoD transformation.

Finally, the RC plans depend on politically sensitive changes in mobilization policy. The highly touted system of using volunteers early in the mobilization process is politically palatable, but if unchanged, would wreak havoc on the RC rotational force.³ If individual members of units in the “ready rotation” queue are allowed to volunteer, those units then require cross-leveling from other units to again become sufficiently ready to mobilize and deploy. The cascading effect from cross-leveling makes each succeeding rotation less capable by destroying unit coherence and rendering useless any earlier investments in readiness.⁴ One way to avoid the “volunteer trap” is to support mobilization reforms that would make possible rapid access to ready units. Perhaps even more important, support must be garnered from DoD and Congress to use those ready units rather than volunteers, even when it is politically expedient to avoid involuntary mobilization.

This cursory review of the RC transformation plans and their constraints for supporting combatant commanders, resource demands, and requirements for mobilization reforms makes it easy to see why those plans generated resistance from those with political or resource vested interests—and that includes about every agency in DoD and beyond. However, the RC leadership correctly surmises that doing nothing is not an option; inaction ensures the RC cannot continue to support operations at anywhere near current levels. The RC plans, with all their potential shortfalls, are at least a good faith effort to meet their obligations to the Army and Nation. I would hope that detractors from their plans would feel obligated to offer alternatives, not just criticisms. The RC leadership has publicly expressed willingness to consider recommendations for better solutions, but so far none have been forthcoming.

ENDNOTES

1. Details of the RC plans are not discussed here. For early explanations of RC transformation programs, see James R. Helmly, “At War and Transforming,” *The Officer*, December 2003, pp. 38-41; and Lieutenant General H. Steven Blum, Chief, National Guard Bureau, “On Point,” *The Officer*, December 2003, pp. 53-55. Both plans have since been refined and are represented in the Army Transformation Campaign Plan.

2. Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, *Rebalancing Forces: Easing the Stress on the Guard and Reserve*, Washington, DC, January 15, 2004, p. 3.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

4. *Reserve Forces: Observations on Recent National Guard Use in Overseas and Homeland Missions and Future Challenges*, Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, April 2004, p. 12.